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The Art of Theodore Dreiser

Bourne, Randolph

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Conversion to TEI.2-conformant markup: University of Virginia Library

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2000

About the print version

The Dial A Fortnightly Journal of Literary Criticism Discussion and Information

Randolph Bourne

2.5 pages

The Dial Publishing Co.1918-1929

Chicago

January 11-June 14 1917

Source copy consulted: AP 2. D48 V 62-63, University of Virginia Alderman Library

Prepared for the University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center.

Published: 1917

english nonfiction prose masculine LCSH

Revisions to the electronic version

February 2001 corrector Lesley Pleasant, The Electronic Text Center

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The Art of Theodore Dreiser

Theodore Dreiser has had the good fortune to evoke a peculiar quality of pugnacious interest among the younger American *intelligentsia* such as has been the lot of almost nobody else writing today unless it be Miss Amy Lowell. We do not usually take literature seriously enough to quarrel over it. Or else we take it so seriously that we urbanely avoid squabbles. Certainly there are none of the vendettas that rage in a culture like that of France. But Mr. Dreiser seems to have made himself, particularly since the suppression of "The 'Genius,'" a veritable issue. Interesting and surprising are the reactions to him. Edgar Lee Masters makes him a "soul-enrapt demi-urge, walking the earth, stalking life"; Harris Merton Lyon saw in him a "seer of inscrutable mien"; Arthur Davison Ficke sees him as master of a passing throng of figures, "labored with immortal illusion, the terrible and beautiful, cruel and wonder-laden illusion of life"; Mr. Powys makes him an epic philosopher of the "life-tide"; H. L. Mencken puts him ahead of Conrad, with "an agnosticism that has almost passed beyond curiosity." On the other hand, an unhappy critic in the "Nation" last year gave Mr. Dreiser his place for all time in a neat antithesis between the realism that was based on a theory of human conduct and the naturalism that reduced life to a mere animal behavior. For Dreiser this last special hell was reserved, and the jungle-like and simian activities of his characters rather exhaustively outlined. At the time this antithesis looked silly. With the appearance of Mr. Dreiser's latest book, "A Hoosier Holiday," it becomes nonsensical. For that wise and delightful book reveals him as a very human critic of very common human life, romantically sensual and poetically realistic, with an artist's vision and a thick, warm feeling for American life.

This book gives the clue to Mr. Dreiser, to his insatiable curiosity about people, about their sexual inclinations, about their dreams, about the homely qualities that make them American. His memories give a picture of the floundering young American that is so typical as to be almost epic. No one has ever pictured this lower middle-class American life so winningly, because no one has had the necessary literary skill with the lack of self-consciousness. Mr. Dreiser is often sentimental, but it is a sentimentality that captivates you with its candor. You are seeing this vacuous, wistful, spiritually rootless, middle-Western life through the eyes of a naïve but very wise boy. Mr. Dreiser seems queer only because he has carried along his youthful attitude in unbroken continuity. He is fascinated with sex because youth is usually obsessed with sex. He puzzles about the universe because youth usually puzzles. He thrills to crudity and violence because sensitive youth usually recoils from the savagery of the industrial world. Imagine incorrigible, sensuous youth endowed with the brooding skepticism of the philosopher who feels the vanity of life, and you have the paradox of Mr. Dreiser. For these two attitudes in him support rather

than oppose each other. His spiritual evolution was out of a pious, ascetic atmosphere into intellectual and personal freedom. He seems to have found himself without losing himself. Of how many American writers can this be said? And for this much shall be forgiven him, -- his slovenliness of style, his lack of nuances, his apathy to the finer shades of beauty, his weakness for the mystical and the vague. Mr. Dreiser suggests the over-sensitive temperament that protects itself by an admiration for crudity and cruelty. His latest book reveals the boyhood shyness and timidity of this Don Juan of novelists. Mr. Dreiser is complicated, but he is complicated in a very understandable American way, the product of the uncouth forces of small-town life and the vast disorganization of the wider American world. As he reveals himself, it is a revelation of a certain broad level of the American soul.

Mr. Dreiser seems uncommon only because he is more naïve than most of us. It is not so much that he swarms his pages with sexful figures as that he rescues sex for the scheme of personal life. He feels a holy mission to slay the American literary superstition that men and women are not sensual beings. But he does not brush this fact in the sniggering way of the popular magazines. He takes it very seriously, so much so that some of his novels become caricatures of desire. It is, however, a misfortune that it has been Brieux and Freud and not native Theodore Dreiser who soaked the sexual imagination of the younger American *intelligentsia*. It would have been far healthier to have absorbed Mr. Dreiser's literary treatment of sex than to have gone hysterical over its pathology. Sex has little significance unless it is treated in personally artistic, novelistic terms. The American tradition had tabooed the treatment of those infinite gradations and complexities of love that fill the literary imagination of a sensitive people. When curiosity got too strong and reticence was repealed in America, we had no means of articulating ourselves except in a deplorable pseudo-scientific jargon that has no more to do with the relevance of sex than the chemical composition of orange paint has to do with the artist's vision. Dreiser has done a real service to the American imagination in despising the underworld and going gravely to the business of picturing sex as it is lived in the personal relations of bungling, wistful, or masterful men and women. He seemed strange and rowdy only because he made sex human, and American tradition had never made it human. It had only made it either sacred or vulgar, and when these categories no longer worked, we fell under the dubious and perverting magic of the psycho-analysts.

In spite of his looseness of literary gait and heaviness of style Dreiser seems a sincere groper after beauty. It is natural enough that this should so largely be the beauty of sex. For where would a sensitive boy, brought up in Indiana and in the big American cities, get beauty expressed for him except in women? What does mid-Western America offer to the starving except its personal beauty? A few landscapes, an occasional picture in a museum, a book of verse perhaps! Would not all the rest be one long, flaunting offense of ugliness and depression? "The 'Genius,'" instead of being that mass of pornographic horror which the Vice Societies repute it to be, is the story of a groping artist whose love of beauty runs obsessingly upon the charm of girlhood. Through different social planes, through business and manual labor and the feverish world of artists, he pursues this lure. Dreiser is refreshing in his air of the moral democrat, who sees life impassively, neither praising nor blaming, at the same

time that he realizes how much more terrible and beautiful and incalculable life is than any of us are willing to admit. It may be all *apologia*, but it comes with the grave air of a mind that wants us to understand just how it all happened. "Sister Carrie" will always retain the fresh charm of a spontaneous working-out of mediocre, and yet elemental and significant, lives. A good novelist catches hold of the thread of human desire. Dreiser does this, and that is why his admirers forgive him so many faults.

If you like to speculate about personal and literary qualities that are specifically American, Dreiser should be as interesting as any one now writing in America. This becomes clearer as he writes more about his youth. His hopelessly unorientated, half-educated, boyhood is so typical of the uncritical and careless society in which wistful American talent has had to grope. He had to be spiritually a self-made man, work out a philosophy of life, discover his own sincerity. Talent in America outside of the ruling class flowers very late, because it takes so long to find its bearings. It has had almost to create its own soil, before it could put in its roots and grow. It is born shivering into an inhospitable and irrelevant group. It has to find its own kind of people and piece together its links of comprehension. It is a gruelling and tedious task, but those who come through it contribute, like Vachel Lindsay, creative work that is both novel and indigenous. The process can be more easily traced in Dreiser than in almost anybody else. "A Hoosier Holiday" not only traces the personal process, but it gives the social background. The common life, as seen throughout the countryside, is touched off quizzically, and yet sympathetically, with an artist's vision. Dreiser sees the American masses in their commonness and at their pleasure as brisk, rather vacuous people, a little pathetic in their innocence of the possibilities of life and their optimistic trustfulness. He sees them ruled by great barons of industry, and yet unconscious of their serfdom. He seems to love this countryside, and he makes you love it.

Dreiser loves, too, the ugly violent bursts of American industry, -- the flaming steel-mills and gaunt lakesides. "The Titan" and "The Financier" are unattractive novels, but they are human documents of the brawn of a passing American era. Those stenographic conversations, webs of financial intrigue, bare bones of enterprise, insult our artistic sense. There is too much raw beef, and yet it all has the taste and smell of the primitive business-jungle it deals with. These crude and greedy captains of finance with their wars and their amours had to be given some kind of literary embodiment, and Dreiser has hammered a sort of raw epic out of their lives.

It is not only his feeling for these themes of crude power and sex and the American common life that makes Dreiser interesting. His emphases are those of a new America which is latently expressive and which must develop its art before we shall really have become articulate. For Dreiser is a true hyphenate, a product of that conglomerate Americanism that springs from other roots than the English tradition. Do we realize how rare it is to find a talent that is thoroughly American and wholly un-English? Culturally we have somehow suppressed the hyphenate. Only recently has he forced his way through the unofficial literary censorship. The *vers-librists* teem with him, but Dreiser is almost the first to achieve a largeness of utterance. His outlook, it is true, flouts the American canons of optimism and redemption, but these were never anything but conventions. There stirs in Dreiser's books a new American

quality. It is not at all German. It is an authentic attempt to make something artistic out of the chaotic materials that lie around us in American life. Dreiser interests because we can watch him grope and feel his clumsiness. He has the artist's vision without the sureness of the artist's technique. This is one of the tragedies of America. But his faults are those of his material and of uncouth bulk, and not of shoddiness. He expresses an America that is in process of forming. The interest he evokes is part of the eager interest we feel in that growth.